A SONG OF THE GUNS

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Cover

A SONG OF THE GUNS

BY

GILBERT FRANKAU, R.S.A.

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NOTE

A Song of the Guns was written under what are probably the most remarkable conditions in which a poem has ever been composed. The author, who is now serving in Flanders, was present at the battle of Loos, and during a lull in the fighting--when the gunners, who had been sleepless for five nights, were resting like tired dogs under their guns--he jotted down the main theme of the poem. After the battle the artillery brigade to which he was attached was ordered to Ypres, and it was during the long trench warfare in this district, within sight of the ruined tower of Ypres Cathedral, that the poem was finally completed. The last three stanzas were written at midnight in Brigade Headquarters with the German shells screaming over into the ruined town.

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A SONG OF THE GUNS

These are our masters, the slim
Grim muzzles that irk in the pit;
That chafe for the rushing of wheels,
For the teams plunging madly to bit
As the gunners wing down to unkey,
For the trails sweeping half-circle-right,
For the six breech-blocks clashing as one
To a target viewed clear on the sight--
Gray masses the shells search and tear
Into fragments that bunch as they run--
For the hour of the red battle-harvest,
The dream of the slaves of the gun!

We have bartered our souls to the guns;
Every fibre of body and brain
Have we trained to them, chained to them. Serfs?
Aye! but proud of the weight of our chain,
Of our backs that are bowed to their workings,
To hide them and guard and disguise,
Of our ears that are deafened with service,
Of hands that are scarred, and of eyes
Grown hawklike with marking their prey,
Of wings that are slashed as with swords
When we hover, the turn of a blade

From the death that is sweet to our lords.

THE VOICE OF THE SLAVES

By the ears and the eyes and the brain,
By the limbs and the hands and the wings,
We are slaves to our masters the guns;
But their slaves are the masters of kings!

HEADQUARTERS

A league and a league from the trenches,
from the traversed maze of the lines,--
Where daylong the sniper watches and daylong the
bullet whines,
And the cratered earth is in travail with mines and
with countermines,--

Here, where haply some woman dreamed, (are
those her roses that bloom
In the garden beyond the windows of my littered
working-room?)
We have decked the map for our masters as a bride
is decked for the groom.

Here, on each numbered lettered square,--cross-road
and mound and wire,
Loophole, redoubt, and emplacement, are the targets
their mouths desire,--
Gay with purples and browns and blues, have we
traced them their arcs of fire.

And ever the type-keys clatter; and ever our keen
wires bring
Word from the watchers a-crouch below, word
from the watchers a-wing;
And ever we hear the distant growl of our hid guns
thundering;

Hear it hardly, and turn again to our maps, where
the trench-lines crawl,
Red on the gray and each with a sign for the
ranging shrapnel's fall--
Snakes that our masters shall scotch at dawn, as is
written here on the wall.

For the weeks of our waiting draw to a close....
There is scarcely a leaf astir
In the garden beyond my windows where the
twilight shadows blur
The blaze of some woman's roses....
"Bombardment orders, sir."

GUN-TEAMS

Their rugs are sodden, their heads are down, their
tails are turned to the storm.
(Would you know them, you that groomed them
in the sleek fat days of peace,--
When the tiles rang to their pawings in the lighted
stalls and warm,--
Now the foul clay cakes on breeching-strap and
clogs the quick-release?)

The blown rain stings, there is never a star, the
tracks are rivers of slime.
(You must harness up by guesswork with a

failing torch for light,
Instep-deep in unmade standings, for it's active-service time,
And our resting weeks are over, and we move
the guns to-night.)

The iron tires slither, the traces sag; their blind
hooves stumble and slide;
They are war-worn, they are weary, soaked with
sweat and sopped with rain.
(You must hold them, you must help them, swing
your lead and centre wide
Where the greasy granite pave peters out to
squelching drain.)

There is shrapnel bursting a mile in front on the
road that the guns must take:
(You are nervous, you are thoughtful, you are
shifting in your seat,
As you watch the ragged feathers flicker orange
flame and break)--
But the teams are pulling steady down the
battered village street.

You have shod them cold, and their coats are long,
and their bellies gray with the mud;
They have done with gloss and polish, but the
fighting heart's unbroke.
We, who saw them hobbling after us down white
roads flecked with blood,
Patient, wondering why we left them, till we
lost them in the smoke;

Who have felt them shiver between our knees,
when the shells rain black from the skies,
When the bursting terrors find us and the lines
stampede as one;
Who have watched the pierced limbs quiver and
the pain in stricken eyes,
Know the worth of humble servants, foolish-faithful

to their gun!

EYES IN THE AIR

Our guns are a league behind us, our target a mile below,
And there's never a cloud to blind us from the haunts of
our lurking foe--
Sunk pit whence his shrapnel tore us, support-trench crest-concealed,
As clear as the charts before us, his ramparts lie revealed.
His panicked watchers spy us, a droning threat in the void;
Their whistling shells outfly us--puff upon puff, deployed
Across the green beneath us, across the flanking grey,
In fume and fire to sheathe us and balk us of our prey.

Below, beyond, above her,
Their iron web is spun!
Flicked but unsnared we hover,
Edged planes against the sun:
Eyes in the air above his lair,
The hawks that guide the gun!

No word from earth may reach us save, white against the ground,
The strips outspread to teach us whose ears are deaf to sound:
But down the winds that sear us, athwart our engine's shriek,
We send--and know they hear us, the ranging guns we speak.
Our visored eyeballs show us their answering pennant, broke
Eight thousand feet below us, a whirl of flame-stabbed smoke--
The burst that hangs to guide us, while numbed gloved fingers tap
From wireless key beside us the circles of the map.

Line--target--short or over--
Comes, plain as clock-hands run,
Word from the birds that hover,
Unblinded, tail to sun--
Word out of air to range them fair,

From hawks that guide the gun!

Your flying shells have failed you, your landward guns are dumb:
Since earth hath naught availed you, these skies be open! Come,
Where, wild to meet and mate you, flame in their beaks for breath,
Black doves! the white hawks wait you on the wind-tossed
boughs of death.
These boughs be cold without you, our hearts are hot for this,
Our wings shall beat about you, our scorching breath shall kiss:
Till, fraught with that we gave you, fulfilled of our desire,
You bank,--too late to save you from biting beaks of fire,--

Turn sideways from your lover,
Shudder and swerve and run,
Tilt; stagger; and plunge over
Ablaze against the sun,--
Doves dead in air, who clomb to dare
The hawks that guide the gun!

SIGNALS

The hot wax drips from the flares
On the scrawled pink forms that litter
The bench where he sits; the glitter
Of stars is framed by the sandbags atop of the dug-out stairs.
And the lagging watch-hands creep;
And his cloaked mates murmur in sleep,--
Forms he can wake with a kick,--
And he hears, as he plays with the pressel-switch, the strapped
receiver click
On his ear that listens, listens;
And the candle-flicker glistens
On the rounded brass of the switch-board where the red wires
cluster thick.

Wires from the earth, from the air;
Wires that whisper and chatter
At night, when the trench-rats patter
And nibble among the rations and scuttle back to their lair;
Wires that are never at rest,--
For the linesmen tap them and test,
And ever they tremble with tone:--
And he knows from a hundred signals the buzzing call of his own,
The breaks and the vibrant stresses,--
The Z and the G and the S's
That call his hand to the answering key and his mouth to the microphone.

For always the laid guns fret
On the words that his mouth shall utter,
When rifle and Maxim stutter
And the rockets volley to starward from the spurting parapet;
And always his ear must hark
To the voices out of the dark,--
For the whisper over the wire,
From the bombed and the battered trenches where the wounded moan in the mire,--
For a sign to waken the thunder
Which shatters the night in sunder
With the flash of the leaping muzzles and the beat of battery-fire.

THE OBSERVERS

Ere the last light that leaps the night has hung and shone and died,
While yet the breast-high fog of dawn is swathed about the plain,
By hedge and track our slaves go back, the waning stars for guide,
Eyes of our mouths; the mists have cleared, the guns would speak again!

Faint on the ears that strain to hear, their orders trickle down
"Degrees--twelve--left of zero line--corrector one three eight--
Three thousand." ... Shift our trails and lift the muzzles that
shall drown
The rifle's idle chatter when our sendings detonate.

Sending or still, these serve our will; the hidden eyes that mark
From gutted farm, from laddered tree that scans the furrowed
slope,
From coigns of slag whose pit-ropes sag on burrowed ways and dark,
In open trench where sandbags hold the steady periscope.

Waking, they know the instant foe, the bullets phutting by,
The blurring lens, the sodden map, the wires that leak or break!
Sleeping, they dream of shells that scream adown a sunless sky--
And the splinters patter round them in their dug-outs as they
wake.

Not theirs, the wet glad bayonet, the red and racing hour,
The rush that clears the bombing-post with knife and hand-
grenade;
Not theirs the zest when, steel to breast, the last survivors cower,--
Yet can ye hold the ground ye won, save these be there to aid?

These, that observe the shell's far swerve, these of the quiet voice,
That bids "go on," repeats the range, corrects for fuse or line...
Though dour the task their masters ask, what room for thought or
choice?
This is ours by right of service, heedless gift of youthful eyne!

Careless they give while yet they live; the dead we tasked too sore
Bear witness we were naught begrudged of riches or of youth;
Careless they gave; across their grave our calling salvoes roar,
And those we maimed come back to us in proof our dead speak

truth!

AMMUNITION COLUMN

I am only a cog in a giant machine, a link of an endless chain:--
And the rounds are drawn, and the rounds are fired,
and the empties return again;
'Railroad, lorry, and limber; battery, column, and park;
'To the shelf where the set fuse waits the breech, from
the quay where the shells embark.
We have watered and fed, and eaten our beef; the
long dull day drags by,
As I sit here watching our "Archibalds" *strafing* an empty sky;
Puff and flash on the far-off blue round the speck
one guesses the plane--
Smoke and spark of the gun-machine that is fed by the endless chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, a little link in the chain,
Waiting a word from the wagon-lines that the guns are hungry again:-
-
Column-wagon to battery-wagon, and battery-wagon to gun;
To the loader kneeling 'twixt trail and wheel from the
shops where the steam-lathes run.
There's a lone mule braying against the line where
the mud cakes fetlock-deep!
There's a lone soul humming a hint of a song in
the barn where the drivers sleep;
And I hear the pash of the orderly's horse as he
canters him down the lane--
Another cog in the gun-machine, a link in the selfsame chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, but a vital link in the chain;
And the Captain has sent from the wagon-line to
fill his wagons again;--
From wagon-limber to gunpit dump; from loader's forearm at breech

To the working party that melts away when the shrapnel
bullets screech.--
So the restless section pulls out once more in column
of route from the right,
At the tail of a blood-red afternoon; so the flux of another night
Bears back the wagons we fill at dawn to the sleeping column again…
Cog on cog in the gun-machine, link on link in the chain!

THE VOICE OF THE GUNS

We are the guns, and your masters! Saw ye our flashes?
Heard ye the scream of our shells in the night, and the
shuddering crashes?
Saw ye our work by the roadside, the gray wounded lying,
Moaning to God that he made them--the maimed and the dying?
Husbands or sons,
Fathers or lovers, we break them! We are the guns!

We are the guns and ye serve us! Dare ye grow weary,
Steadfast at nighttime, at noontime; or waking, when dawn
winds blow dreary
Over the fields and the flats and the reeds of the barrier water,
To wait on the hour of our choosing, the minute decided for slaughter?
Swift the clock runs;
Yes, to the ultimate second. Stand to your guns!

We are the guns and we need you! Here in the timbered
Pits that are screened by the crest and the copse
where at dusk ye unlimbered,
Pits that one found us--and, finding, gave life (did
he flinch from the giving?);
Laboured by moonlight when wraith of the dead
brooded yet o'er the living,
Ere with the sun's
Rising the sorrowful spirit abandoned its guns.

Who but the guns shall avenge him? Strip us for action!
Load us and lay to the centremost hair of the dial-sight's refraction.
Set your quick hands to our levers to compass the sped soul's assoiling;
Brace your taut limbs to the shock when the thrust
of the barrel recoiling
Deafens and stuns!
Vengeance is ours for our servants. Trust ye the guns!

Least of our bond-slaves or greatest, grudge ye the burden?
Hard is this service of ours which has only our service for guerdon:
Grow the limbs lax, and unsteady the hands, which
aforetime we trusted;
Flawed, the clear crystal of sight; and the clean
steel of hardihood rusted?
Dominant ones,
Are we not tried serfs and proven--true to our guns?

Ye are the guns! Are we worthy? Shall not these speak for us,
Out of the woods where the torn trees are slashed with
the vain bolts that seek for us,
Thunder of batteries firing in unison, swish of shell flighting,
Hissing that rushes to silence and breaks to the thud of alighting?
Death that outruns
Horseman and foot? Are we justified? Answer, O guns!

Yea! by your works are ye justified,--toil unrelieved;
Manifold labours, coördinate each to the sending achieved;
Discipline, not of the feet but the soul, unremitting, unfeigned;
Tortures unholy by flame and by maiming, known, faced, and disdained;
Courage that shuns
Only foolhardiness;--even by these are ye worthy your guns!

Wherefore--and unto ye only--power has been given;
Yea! beyond man, over men, over desolate cities and riven;
Yea! beyond space, over earth and the seas and the
sky's high dominions;
Yea! beyond time, over Hell and the fiends and
the Death-Angel's pinions!
Vigilant ones,

Loose them, and shatter, and spare not. We are the guns!

THE END

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